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DE RUEHRN #0072/01 3382122
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P R 042122Z DEC 09
FM USMISSION UN ROME
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1209
INFO RUEHRC/USDA FAS WASHDC
RUEHC/USAID WASHDC
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 UN ROME 000072

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AID FOR SUSAN BRADLEY; TREASURY FOR P.GHANDI; STATE FOR EEB G.CLEMENTS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: HOW BIOVERSITY INTERNATIONAL (AS PART OF THE CONSULTATIVE GROUP ON INTERNATIONAL AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH) CONTRIBUTES TO GLOBAL FOOD SECURITY

REF: USUN Rome 61 (CFS Reform Plan)

Summary and Action Request

¶1. (U) On December 1, the Ambassador met with the Director General, Emile Frison, and Deputy DG of Bioversity International (BI) - the Rome-based leg of the Consultative Group on Agricultural Research (CGIAR) - for an introductory briefing on BI's work and its contribution to global food security. Frison provided an overview of BI's Program of Work and its efforts to consolidate and reform the CGIAR network. In terms of support to country-led food security strategies, Frison described BI's policy work in Rome and abroad, and explained technical challenges associated with launching a "Green Revolution" in Africa. They were not invited to attend Rwanda's December 7-8 food security strategy launch, but have projects in Rwanda and staff in Nairobi and Kampala who could attend.

¶2. (U) On reform of CGIAR (and its 15 research centers), Frison said a new, legally-independent Consortium would be created by late-Feb/early-March to give the Group a single voice and higher political profile. The effort is being led by CGIAR at the World Bank in Washington. Frison advocated housing the new Board in Rome to complement work underway at the UN agencies here, including in the Committee on World Food Security (CFS). Frison believed that CGIAR's new funding mechanisms, with less restricted project funding, would promote greater flexibility and sustainability. The reform effort will help deliver research results to the field for practical implementation. BI will also continue to promote strengthened biological diversity in agricultural development, improved nutrition, assistance with national legislation in key areas, and stronger value chains involving government, civil society and the private sector. Frison encouraged increased USG funding for Bioversity International, in addition to CGIAR. ACTION REQUEST: If CGIAR is not already represented at the Rwanda event, we recommend their inclusion. If the USG supports having the new CGIAR Consortium/Board based in Rome, we see them as adding value toward improved coordination of the Rome-based agencies for food security. We welcome Washington thinking on this topic. END SUMMARY AND ACTION REQUEST.

¶3. (U) Emile Frison (Belgium) and Kwesi Ateah Krah (Ghana), DG and DDG of Bioversity International, respectively, briefed the Ambassador on December 1 on the work and ongoing reforms at BI and its parent network - the CGIAR. During their 90-minute meeting, Frison detailed the work of BI, its history, and provided an overview of the research it does as a key part of the larger CGIAR. Most of the CGIAR centers, he noted, maintained valuable agricultural seed banks for local use. BI is developing a "gene portal" for public access to genetic materials and maintains a seed bank for banana species. Its real work, however, is focused on global policy issues, given its location amidst the Rome-based UN food and agriculture agencies. BI, he noted, is pleased to be speaking more regularly on behalf of the CGIAR in Rome and elsewhere, and is particularly content with an active role within the reforming CFS (reftel).

Challenges in Africa

¶4. (U) Asked to explain how BI and the CGIAR (set up in the 1970s) could contribute to the globally-sanctioned food security strategy and its emphasis on country-led strategies, Frison said

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BI was already working in many countries around the globe and with numerous regional research networks, particularly in Africa. BI had projects in Rwanda, for example, but was unaware of Kigali's plans to launch a food security strategy in early December. Nonetheless, if invited, field staff in Nairobi or Kampala might be able to attend the event.

¶5. (U) Asked why the Green Revolution that helped feed so many in Asia during the 1970's had not easily transferred to Africa, Frison described some of the challenges. Unlike Asia and elsewhere, Africa did attract the same level of investment to develop the necessary infrastructure and "support network" built around new and successful seed varieties engineered during the Green Revolution in Asia. Soils in Africa, he said, were more difficult and often do not support intensive agriculture, as they lose fertility quickly in many areas. The African approach, as a result, is focused less on maximizing production as it is on minimizing the risk of major crop failure (due to limited extension services, credit, etc). Nonetheless, on the positive side, Frison noted that Africa, due to its shortage of intensive agriculture and mechanization maintained tremendous agricultural genetic diversity that should be used to benefit small-hold and family farmers, improve nutrition, and minimize risks of plant disease. The approach taken by the Gates Foundation, he believed, was still too focused on industrial agriculture models that may be inappropriate in the African context. Better education and extension services are largely what is needed there, he added.

New Board Structure; Housed in Rome?

¶6. (U) The CGIAR, including BI, is undergoing a major reform

project set to be completed in the coming weeks and months, led by a team at the CGIAR headquarters at the World Bank in Washington, DC. A major part of the reform effort will be a restructuring of the network's governing structure, aimed at providing a single voice and a higher political stature. Frison believes this will help ensure a seat at the table for CGIAR/BI, particularly in Rome among the larger UN agencies. He added that the 15 CGIAR centers would form a single consortium, with its own legal identity, with a CEO and Board Chairman with world-class stature. Names for those positions are expected to be announced soon. The first meeting of the new Board is expected to occur next March, ahead of a key meeting on agriculture biodiversity in Montpellier, France also in March (http://www.agrobiodiversityplatform.org/wp_main/?p=223). Frison strongly believes the Board should be located in Rome, to take advantage of the work of the UN agencies, IDLO, the CFS, and other bodies working to promote global food security.

ACTION REQUEST: Post seeks feed-back on whether this is in the interest of the USG, and whether we should encourage such a move. END ACTION REQUEST.

Call for Additional Resources

¶7. (U) Before finishing, Frison made a pitch for increased USG assistance for BI, in addition to the significant assistance it is already giving the CGIAR headquarters at the World Bank. Noting that China (USD 160 thousand) was already providing approximately one half of the USG contribution to BI, Frison welcomed the core funding already given by USAID, but that more could be used. Likewise, additional contacts and coordination between donors and the new Board and its individual centers would be beneficial for the network, as a whole.

Comment

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¶8. (U) BI and the broader CGIAR are clearly key players in the food security portfolio, and their role should be clearly understood and supported, where appropriate. BI's work to establish and maintain seed banks in the developing world, promote biological diversity, and nutrition are adding value and should also be a part of country led food security planning in Africa and elsewhere. We may want to consider including them in our thinking and in future roll-out ceremonies like the one hosted next week by Rwanda. Their work with IDLO to help develop seed legislation in developing countries, their collaboration with FAO to promote implementation of the Treaty on Genetic Resources, work with IFAD and other Rome agencies is also adding value and is consistent with Principle Four of the Rome Food Summit declaration, that is leveraging multilateral institutions. Their prominent inclusion in the CFS will also help retain and encourage a useful focus on nutrition and bio-diversity.

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